

Lannon's Opera House
500-08 King Street
Alexandria
Virginia

HABS No. VA-675

HABS
VA
7-ALEX,
146-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

LANNON'S OPERA HOUSE

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Location: 500-08 King Street, Alexandria, Virginia (southwest corner of intersection with Pitt Street)

Present Owner: Demolished after 1969 by the Alexandria Redevelopment Housing Authority as part of an urban renewal project in the old commercial center of Alexandria.

Statement of Significance: This two-storied building housed a restaurant and game room on the first floor and a large theatrical area on the second and reflected a segment of the entertainment facilities offered by Alexandria. It was typical of the combination of first floor commercial space and second floor entertainment hall that was built across the country after the Civil War.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Sometime between 1874 and 1884.

On May 18, 1874, the executors of the estate of Robert H. Miller, deceased, conveyed to John Lannon, for \$10,100, the property at the southwest corner of King and Pitt Streets, fronting 61 feet 8½ inches on King Street, and 111 feet 7 inches on Pitt Street. (Miller was one of the sons of Mordecai Miller, an early Alexandria silversmith, who became a successful merchant.) There was undoubtedly a building on the lot at the time Lannon acquired it, possibly the china and glass store of Robert H. Miller, which was somewhere on King Street. Lannon executed a deed of trust on the property, which was released May 31, 1875, so it is probable that the building was erected some time after that date.

Lannon's will, dated May 13, 1886 and recorded September 16, 1886, gives us little information about his estate, although he owned a substantial amount of real property in Alexandria:

Alexandria May 13, 1886

Know all men by these Presents, that I John Lannon of the City of Alexandria, State of Virginia, of sound mind, do make this my last will and testament. I

leave all my estate, Plate, furniture, wagons etc. of all kinds and description unto Mary E. Brown for the support and maintainence (sic) of my children and choose Thos. Devitt and Jno. McGahey of Alexandria to see the provisions of same carried out. I also want the business carried on as usual at my place of business for say 12 months at least after my decease, my debts to be paid as soon as possible.

John Lannon.

I John Lannon do make this codicil to the foregoing will dated on the 13th of May 1886. I direct that no bond be required of Miss Mary E. Brown as trustee for my children and no security be required of my executors...

his

John Lannon

X

mark

As to Lannon's "business," the directory of business houses appearing in the Alexandria Gazette's of 1884 list him as a "Wholesale Liquor Dealer."

The Gazette of September 17, 1884, carries an advertisement for the:

OPERA HOUSE RESTAURANT AND POOL ROOM
The Palace Saloon of Alexandria
Bergner and Engel's, Portner's Milwaukee
and Rochester Beers

.....

MEALS AT ALL HOURS

.....

L. Brill, Jr., Proprietor.

Three days later the Gazette carries the following notice:

OPERA HOUSE
Dime Museum and Concert Co.
GRAND OPENING ...September 25, 26 and 27

Whether this "grand opening" heralded the completion of the Opera House, or whether it referred to a re-opening after closing for the summer months, it is impossible to say.

2. Architect: Unknown
3. Original and subsequent owners: John Lannon was the first owner. A deed of lease in September 1916 to the Alexandria Amusement Company refers to: "All that hall in the second

story on King Street known as Lannon's Opera House, and the store on the corner of King and Pitt Streets now used as an entrance to the said Opera House." Before it was demolished, the hall, or second floor, was used as a bowling alley.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

A "Local News" item in the Gazette of Friday, April 9, 1886, gives a review of current and coming attractions at the Opera House:

Lannon's Opera House.--D'Ennery's powerful drama, The Two Orphans, was produced last night by the Kittle Rhoades Dramatic Company in a manner that well merited the liberal applause it received. The play, so full of attractive features and replete with moral instruction, was excellently interpreted, the full company fully sustaining their reputations as careful and painstaking artists. Tonight Pygmalion and Galatea will be given, the play to conclude with the comedy of Andy Blake, and for the matinee tomorrow The German Detective is announced.

The musical absurdity, 'Odds and Ends,' which is to be played at the Opera House next week, is said to be one of the most laughable pieces presented at this house in a long time. It introduces a number of very clever specialists, who furnish constant entertainment. An exchange says, 'Miss Josie Devoe as Tod, as bright as a sunbeam and as merry as a lark, won the hearts of the audience at once with her demure playfulness. Mr. R. G. Knowles as Professor Gimcrack, proved himself to be an entertaining comedian, and his songs were encored vociferously. The other roles were creditably performed.'

C. Bibliography:

Newspaper articles as cited; Alexandria Will Book No. 1, Corporation Court, page 433; Alexandria Deed Books 4, pages 93 and 105; and, 65, page 457.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

A large building by the standards of nineteenth century King Street, the two-storied building expressed the conventional commercial functions at the first floor. The tall windows at the second floor indicated the large open spaces devoted to theatre facilities.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Two stories, six bays x eight bays.
2. Wall construction, finish and color: Brick, uncertain bond but likely common.
3. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The shop facade at the 506 King Street section was heavily altered in the twentieth century. The entrance at 508 King, because of its height, appears to have been the entrance to the entertainment hall. The facades at the 500 and 502 King Street sections are designed with a central entrance flanked by show windows and crowned by an elaborate cornice that is an attenuated version of the roof's cornice.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Elongated windows at the second floor are arranged in three pairs along King Street and crowned by segmental hoods fashioned of molded brick. Simplified versions of the hoods appear over six windows facing Pitt Street.
4. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Shed roof with parapet. The street facade rises in step fashion over the predominant height of the building.
 - b. Cornice, eaves: A protruding cornice is supported by paired brackets resembling roof braces. The brackets extend beyond the entablature and terminate in a circular drop.

C. Description of Interior:

From the single photograph of the second floor interior, one sees in the large open space the bowling alleys that replaced the theatrical furnishings. There is an altered balcony supported on four cast iron columns across the north end, indicating that the stage was at the south.

D. Site:

The building occupies a corner lot and faces northward on King Street.

Prepared by Mrs. Hugh B. Cox of
The Historic Alexandria
Foundation
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Edited by
Antoinette J. Lee
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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken in 1968 to document the commercial and residential buildings of downtown Alexandria which were to be demolished in an urban renewal project. The project was cosponsored by the Historic Alexandria Foundation and the Historic American Buildings Survey. Mrs. Hugh B. Cox was the historian and George Eisenman supplied the photographs. The material was edited and updated in 1975 by Antoinette J. Lee, working on contract for HABS.